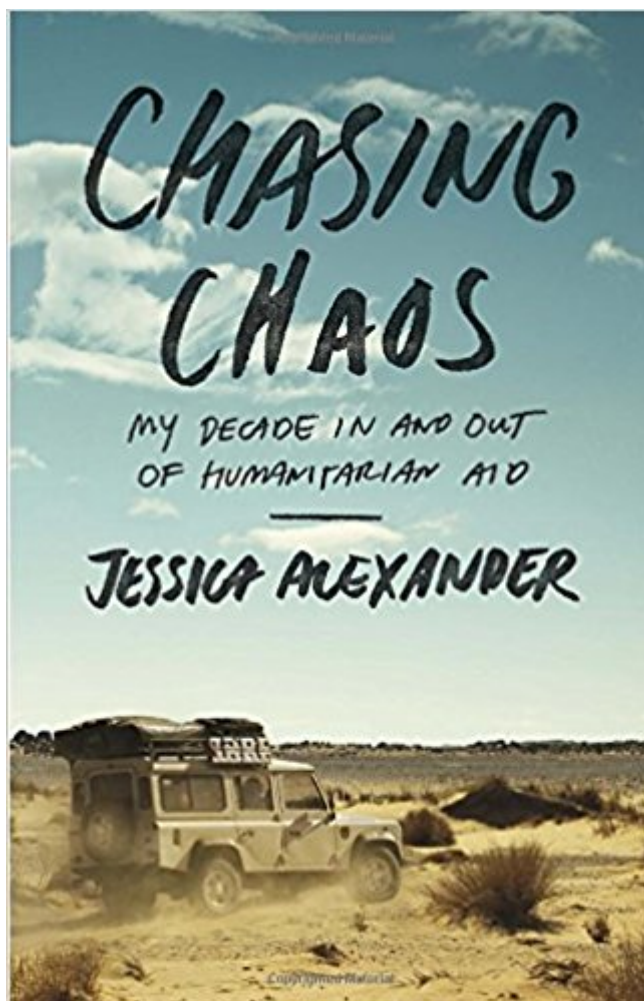


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# Chasing Chaos: My Decade In And Out Of Humanitarian Aid



## Synopsis

Jessica Alexander arrived in Rwanda in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide as an idealistic intern, eager to contribute to the work of the international humanitarian aid community. But the world that she encountered in the field was dramatically different than anything she could have imagined. It was messy, chaotic, and difficult—but she was hooked. In this honest and irreverent memoir, she introduces readers to the realities of life as an aid worker. We watch as she manages a 24,000-person camp in Darfur, collects evidence for the Charles Taylor trial in Sierra Leone, and contributes to the massive aid effort to clean up a shattered Haiti. But we also see the alcohol-fueled parties and fleeting romances, the burnouts and self-doubt, and the struggle to do good in places that have long endured suffering. Tracing her personal journey from wide-eyed and naïve newcomer to hardened cynic and, ultimately, to hopeful but critical realist, Alexander transports readers to some of the most troubled locations around the world and shows us not only the seemingly impossible challenges, but also the moments of resilience and recovery.

## Book Information

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: Broadway Books (October 15, 2013)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0770436919

ISBN-13: 978-0770436919

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 160 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #32,834 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #22 in Books > Law >

Constitutional Law > Human Rights #34 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social

Sciences > Disaster Relief #44 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable

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## Customer Reviews

“In *Chasing Chaos*, Jessica Alexander serves up a sharp critique of the multi-billion dollar humanitarian aid industry, wrapped in a tender coming-of-age story. Her quietly evocative prose recreates the painful, poignant, and sometimes hilarious experience of marching into ‘the field’ of armed conflict and disaster to relieve suffering, supported by donations from those who expect heroism. With remarkable honesty and empathy, Alexander reveals how absurd and presumptuous

it is to imagine we can fix the world and, even more profoundly, why we must continue to try. An important book.

• Sheri Fink, New York Times bestselling author of *Five Days at Memorial* “Terrific new memoir...It’s Wild in Sudan.”

• Nicholas Kristof, New York Times columnist “In her new book *Chasing Chaos*, Jessica Alexander offers a poignant, clear-eyed look at the world of international disaster relief and her own addiction to aid work | *Chasing Chaos* is a reminder that happiness is an act of delicate and ever-evolving inner compromise. The book makes you simultaneously want to pack your bags and never leave home.”

• *The Daily Beast* “Enlightening...eye-opening...*Chasing Chaos* is a solid contribution to what is hopefully a growing genre of writing about a sector that deserves more attention and oversight.”

• *Associated Press* “Jessica Alexander’s book, *Chasing Chaos*, is not only a candid portrait of the life of a humanitarian aid worker, but a wonderful coming-of-age story that will resonate with any woman who has questioned how to have a more meaningful life.”

• Mia Farrow “Refreshingly absent in *Chasing Chaos* are any declarations of grandeur or of superior moral fiber. Rather, Alexander’s honesty about her own ignorance on the true severity of the conditions in the places she visits is precisely what makes her remarkable story so accessible. Even now, after a decade working with multiple humanitarian organizations, the author still makes plain how much she has to learn. Alexander is proud of her achievements, and certainly should be, but it is in her detailing of the vast room for improvement in the system that she focuses, with a dry wit and healthy dose of honest self-evaluation, that we are able to connect with her experiences on a more personal level. We are all the more fortunate for it.”

• *Bustle.com* “I think that is what Jessica does so well: puts a human face on aid work. And not just her face, but the faces of her international and national colleagues | Jessica reveals the inconsistencies, the ambivalence of aid work as she takes us to Sudan, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, New York, and Haiti. But, she also offers valuable lessons for the next generation.”

• Brendan Rigby, *whydev.org* “What Mary Roach does for the alimentary canal in *Gulp* and Robin Nagle does for garbage collecting in *Picking Up*, Jessica Alexander does for global catastrophe in *Chasing Chaos*...An entertaining memoir of life on the front lines of global catastrophe reveals as much about its author as the world of humanitarian aid.”

• *Shelf Awareness* “A no-holds-barred description of what it is like to travel to world disaster sites and engage in the complex, challenging, nitty-gritty work of making a difference across lines of culture, class, age, gender, and perspective. In telling the story of her decade as a young and passionate humanitarian aid worker, Jessica Alexander also manages to tell us the best and the worst of what this work is like and to speculate on the aid

establishment—how it has changed, where it works and what its limits are. A must read for anyone with global interests—and that should be all of us.

—Ruth Messinger, President, American Jewish World Service

“Chasing Chaos examines the lives that aid workers lead and the work which aid workers do with honesty, clarity, and warmth. While the book is peppered with hilarious anecdotes—it is also salted with tears. Honest, genuine, heartfelt tears. This life and this work that aid and development workers embark upon so often oscillates wildly between stomach bursting laughter and shoulder seizing weeping—Chasing Chaos captures these oscillations, and the doldrums in between the ends of the spectrum, perfectly.

—Casey Kuhlman, New York Times bestselling author of Shooter

“During—ten years of working with the sick, the hungry, and the injured, Jessica Alexander touches and is touched by victims of genocide, earthquakes, tsunamis, and bombs. The compelling quality of this book is Alexander’s honesty, sharp observations, and conversational prose. With humor and insight, she shares the intimate details of her everyday life. Even if you’re a seasoned traveler, this entry into the world of humanitarian aid organizations—the good, the bad, and the frustrating—is fascinating.

—Rita Golden Gelman, author of Tales of a Female Nomad

“In—Chasing Chaos, Alexander takes us to a place where few outsiders can go, cracking open the rarefied world of humanitarianism to bare its contradictions—and her own—with boldness and humor. The result is an immensely valuable field guide to the mind of that uniquely powerful and vulnerable of beasts: the international aid worker.

—Jonathan M. Katz, author of The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster

“Not only is Jessica Alexander a wonderful writer—her clear, evocative prose transported me into refugee camps in Darfur, war-torn Sierra Leone and post-earthquake Haiti—but she is honest about the complexity of ‘doing good,’ without being defeatist. Funny, touching, and impossible to put down, this book should be required reading for anyone contemplating a career in aid, and for all of us who wonder how we can make a useful contribution to a better world, wherever we are.

—Marianne Elliott, author of—Zen Under Fire: How I Found Peace in the Midst of War

“A fresh, very readable, highly personal account of the trials and tribulations of a young aid worker as she confronts the daily realities—the good, the bad and the very uncomfortable—of life dealing with some of the most important humanitarian challenges of the last decade.

—Ross Mountain, Former Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General and Humanitarian Coordinator, United Nations

“You’ll start Chasing Chaos because you are interested in humanitarian aid. You’ll

finish because of Jessica Alexander's irresistible storytelling: her honesty, her humanity, her wackadoodle colleagues, her dad. I loved it.

• Kenneth Cain, author of *Emergency Sex: and Other Desperate Measures* "A hardened idealist's challenging look at the contradictions, complications, and enduring importance of humanitarian aid."

• Robert Calderisi, author of *The Trouble with Africa: Why Foreign Aid Isn't Working* "Jessica Alexander's *Chasing Chaos* is a must read for anyone concerned with helping those in need. Americans are some of the most generous people on Earth in reaching out to those coping with disasters, both natural and man-made, but how we give and what we give can make the difference between saving lives and only making a bad situation even worse. The path to hell really can be paved with good intentions, as Ms. Alexander perceptively describes and as I have seen during my own twenty plus years working in Africa and the Middle East, including many tours dealing with the same countries Alexander portrays. She knows of what she speaks."

• Christopher Datta, Former American Foreign Service Officer and author of *Touched with Fire: Based on the True Story of Ellen Craft*

JESSICA ALEXANDER spent much of the last decade responding to humanitarian crises across the globe. A former Fulbright scholar, she has worked for various NGOs as well as UN agencies. She has a dual masters degree from Columbia and is currently working toward her PhD.

It's 2005 in Darfur, western Sudan. Jessica Alexander, a young American aid worker, is woken at 5.30am by the call to prayer. The night before she put a wet towel on her forehead and soaked her pajamas so that they would keep her cool. Now she gets out of bed to face the heat again and go to one of the camps for the internally displaced. Brought to Darfur to do something else, Alexander has suddenly found herself needed to manage Al Salam, a camp of about 20,000 people. She is just 27. She now spends her days trying to ensure that new arrivals are registered and that the kids don't drown in the sewage pits. (Not that those kids are always appealing. The African Union peacekeepers have corrupted them: "It wasn't uncommon for them to yell 'suck my c\*\*\* or big t\*\*\* when white women passed," she reports.) Was Alexander doing any good? If not, why not, and what should we do about it? In this thoughtful book, Alexander tries to answer these questions, and I think she sort of succeeds. Alexander hadn't originally planned to be an aid worker. On graduation she joined a New York ad agency, thrilled with her new briefcase, a gift from her

mother, and the sound of her high heels clacking as she crosses the floor of the hall. Disillusion sets in as she finds herself working on a frozen pizza account. “When I wasn’t stuffing my face with our own soggy, salty brand or comparing the fat content ...to that of our competitors, I was watching their ads,” she says. Then her mother dies. “If I could die at age fifty, I wanted a more meaningful profession than the one provided by Hot Pockets and Sunny Delight.” Alexander decides she’d like to work in aid and development. She joins the New York office of an NGO, but quickly becomes frustrated that she has never been to any of the places her colleagues are talking about. She decides to do a Masters in development, and winds up doing a summer internship with the UN in Rwanda. It is at that point that this book takes off. Alexander finds herself transcribing people’s interviews for refugee status. She finds out that these take a long time to process, being approved in Kigali and Nairobi and going eventually to Geneva. She is also less than impressed with her fellow-expats. “Most expats lived ...in spacious houses situated behind high walls, some with barbed wire at the top ...At dinner parties like these we drank alcohol from Italy and ate cheese from France. The expats sat around, complaining that their guard was caught sleeping again....” This needs a pinch of salt. Not all expats in aid live like that, especially if they work for NGOs. Still, some do. And as Alexander’s career progresses, she finds the aid worker’s expat way of life bizarre. “It wasn’t out of the ordinary when in any humanitarian setting to get an e-mail with the subject line “War Children Party • Thursday Night • Festive Attire Required! • or “Center for Survivors of Torture • Fancy Dress Night Friday.” Alexander went on to do research in Sierra Leone (she is more positive about this) and eventually to help evaluate the responses to the 2004 tsunami and the 2010 Haiti earthquake. In Colombo, she hears that post-tsunami that there is actually too much money, chasing too few projects; NGOs building child centres, for example, and then competing for the children. There are also economic distortions from the influx of aid, and she meets a teacher and a judge who work for local NGOs because there’s more money in it. Meanwhile in Darfur there was too little money, and northern Uganda and Congo got no attention. In Haiti, where more than 220,000 people were killed and approximately 180,000 homes were wrecked, she finds that cars bound for aid agencies are held up in customs because (it is said) officials are getting kickbacks from car rental companies. Working at New York HQ is no better, as she must confront the language of bureaucratic obfuscation. “Complementarity of processes, sectoral

coverage, evaluability of impact, operationalization of the concept. Eventually enough of these invented phrases were dropped in documents or e-mails that people stopped wondering if they held actual meaning. “Modalities are in place” was the response you got almost every time you asked how a project was progressing. As an editor in one of the big aid organizations, I have to weed this noxious self-serving rubbish out of reports (I have banned the word modality). So I can confirm that Alexander has a point. It sounds from the above as if this book is telling us that all aid is a waste. In fact, Alexander is more nuanced than that. She points out that while aid may be an unregulated industry, it is a self-critical one, and it is considering its failures and increasing its transparency. She is right about this; one wishes the banks could do the same. She finishes by talking about innovations like cash transfers and mobile technology. Again, this is true; UNICEF, for instance, is putting a lot of effort into innovation. Alexander also puts the aid “biz” in perspective. The sums spent are large (\$ 17.9 billion on humanitarian crises worldwide in 2012) but are dwarfed by the \$ 114 billion for Katrina relief, the \$ 50 billion for Storm Sandy, and the \$ 13.7 billion spent on the 2012 London Olympics. Neither does Alexander ever say that humanitarian aid is a waste of time. What she wants readers to understand is that aid cannot fix the world. Good government is needed too. I did have reservations about this book. It’s a bit longer than it needs to be, and occasionally repetitive. At times Alexander is too negative about the people who work in aid. In fact some of them are profoundly committed and do lose their lives, as seven UNICEF staff did in a bomb explosion in Somalia in 2015. I wondered, too, if everyone in this book would really have wanted to be. Some deserve Alexander’s scrutiny, but perhaps not all. In particular, staying with a local family in Kigali, she records there was often someone’s turd floating in the toilet bowl; did she need to tell us that? I also found Alexander a little privileged at times. When she first decides she wants to do aid work, she is told to go into the Peace Corps to get some field credit. But: “I wasn’t exactly prepared to commit to living in a remote village in Burkina Faso or Guatemala for a whole two years. Not at this point, anyway. I started as a volunteer and served for nearly five years. I also wondered whether she realised how lucky she was to get her student internship in Rwanda. Still, she made good use of it, and has clearly not been afraid of hardship. Few people would live and work somewhere like Darfur by choice. Also, while Chasing Chaos has no literary pretensions, it’s well-written. The beginning was immediately evocative for me, as I began my own international career in Sudan, albeit many years before. I could feel the extreme heat and hear the scraping of the zinc doors, and taste the

very sweet tea and imagine the bleached-white sky at midday. And in general, I did like this book. Alexander is clear about the frustrations, and clear about their causes. She appears to be someone with values and common sense. She also accepts that while her business should not exist, it also cannot not exist, at least for now; and she is responsible and practical. *Chasing Chaos* is an honest and readable book about life at the sharp end of humanitarian aid. Despite some reservations, I strongly recommend it.

Reading Jessica's account of her life in the field of humanitarian aid is insightful in revealing the overwhelming challenges, realities, and consequences of the work of those committed as participants in international crises support. It illuminates the behind the scenes tangled and competitive aspects that have baffled me as a minuscule cog in that world. Her honesty is compelling and I respect her efforts to not 'sugar coat' the day to day struggles, frustrations, and horrors encountered. Though humbled in the field, her contributions are exceptional and dignify the overwhelming efforts and sacrifices made by aid workers across the globe. I can only hope that she has been successful in creating the balance with her personal life that she dreamed of and continues to bring her wisdom and experience to the international crises still challenging our world today.

From the moment I read the Yahoo! News article regarding this book, I immediately knew I had to read it. I got it just a few weeks back and I seldom put it down until I finished reading it. On the surface, this story is about humanitarianism, but I came away from it feeling as though it was actually one person's reflections regarding the human condition. The totality of experiences that we attribute to our lives as humans is featured in Jessica Alexander's tale of her career in humanitarian aid. We see moments of tragedy (mostly moments of tragedy), with a few small victories here and there. People suffer loss, people experience incredible highs, only to be brought back down to unbelievable lows. We see wide-eyed idealism washed away by the brutal and unforgiving realities of the world we live in, followed by "growing up" and both an acceptance of the ways of the world and a newfound perspective on the things one has no control over. All of this set against the backdrop of disasters whose scale is unfathomable. During and after reading this book, it will be impossible for a reader to not look inward and examine their own lives, emotions and feelings and wonder what it all truly amounts to. If Jessica Alexander were a fictional character, she would be one of the most endearing characters of her time. She truly bares her soul here and writes with a purpose, as if she has carried such a heavy burden for so long and wishes to let it all go by sharing



her experiences with the rest of us. Ms. Alexander has no problems portraying herself as flawed, imperfect and vulnerable; she readily admits that altruism was not the biggest reason for her choosing the career field she is currently in. While I am worlds apart from her in terms of background, life course and outlooks, she is someone I felt I could relate to very well. Her humanity really shines through and Alexander comes through like the kind of person you would feel very glad to have known. While her tales of her experiences in humanitarian aid and in foreign lands are certainly captivating and the focus of the story, Alexander's "character," for a lack of a better term, really surfaces when she speaks about the loss of her mother. Not all of us can work in humanitarian aid (as the book describes, it is not an easy field to get into and is most certainly not for everyone), but all of us can at least contemplate the loss of a loved one. The emotions and recollections she shares with us regarding that unfortunate moment in her life are difficult to read, but it will make a reader take a deep look within themselves and evaluate our own lives, decisions and experiences. These tales, coupled with her incredible storytelling, plain-talk, bluntness and infectious humor, makes for a person whom you feel so much empathy and a strange sense of "loyalty" to. It was only fitting that I finished this book on Thanksgiving. A thought that came up frequently while reading this memoir was just how fortunate I have it here in the United States. The incredible amount of human suffering endured by so many people around the world is truly humbling and more than enough to make you realize how far the U.S. and the rest of the developed world has come. While this book may not transform you into an aid worker, it ought to ensure that you never take plumbing for granted ever again!

This book provided a great insight into the world of big humanitarian aid. The majority of the book is about how misplaced and poorly thought out aid efforts often are. At the very end of the book, the author spends a few pages trying to justify why she still works in the industry, and why it's still a viable effort. After everything she revealed throughout the book, the justification falls really short.

Though it is not an easy book to read, it is clearly a testimony to a young person's willingness to put her ideals into an intense practice. Written with honesty and as objective a point-of-view as possible. The author provides us with a behind-the-scenes opportunity for which I am grateful.

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